Thank you for the introduction, Lizzie. Good afternoon, I’m delighted to be here today. Thank you for attending our session, and a special thank you to Lizzie and Carol for their insight and collaboration with this prolonged panel.

Peace movements of the twentieth century emphasized the need to prepare younger generations for life in an interdependent world. For the past 70 years, K-12 international schools have aimed to foster internationally-minded global citizens. More than 13,000 international schools are educating more than 5 million students worldwide today (ISC Research). While international schools were established to accommodate the globally mobile expatriate families of multinational companies and government agencies, the enrollment of host-country students at international schools has increased in recent years (Hayden and Thompson; UNESCO). Not one international school is like another, and economic and political influences can rapidly change the demographics of an international school, sometimes overnight. The various iterations of the international school make it difficult to define, but there are two unifying factors: foreign educators and Western curricula. One of the appeals of an international school education is learning English for the purpose of learning in English, but it is rarely discussed how the focus on English can come at a high cost to students’ home languages and their developing multilingualism. This talk examines how multilingual identities can be made public, the mechanisms that stifle them private, and engaging with multiple languages in the writing classroom. I will discuss how English as the lingua franca at international schools guarantees students finish high school equipped with the cultural capital to gain a competitive advantage in post-secondary education and future employment, but also how language ideologies can suppress students’ home languages and diminish the linguistic diversity at international schools. More specifically, I will focus on the literary explorations in a high school English class and the process of writing linguistic autobiographies to “reconstruct policies ground up” (Canagarajah 587).

Even though English functions as a common language of communication and instruction at K-12 international schools, it is not always treated as a multinational language. International education has been criticized for perpetuating standard language ideologies through curricular programs, pedagogies, institutional values, even hiring practices (see Mertin). Co-constructed by government visa restrictions and institutional requirements, native-speakerism is tightly bound in the hiring policies of international educators. Teacher candidates seeking employment report being “unhirable” because their passports do not come from countries where English is an official language. Other instances illustrate the hierarchies of English varieties in which “native English speakers” must come from North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, rather than India, Singapore, or the Philippines. As a result, the culture of teaching and learning at international schools is often established by monolinguial administrators and teachers who may inadvertently view nonstandard English or English language learning as an obstacle rather than a rich resource for learning to emerge. University admissions are another influence that preserves the language ideologies at international schools. Acknowledging that post-secondary institutions should admit students who will not be held back by language barriers, the application process authorizes standardized English exams, such as TOEFL and IELTS, as well as the accompanying test-prep industries, to safeguard standard language ideologies by quantifying students’ proficiency as an indicator for students’ success in post-secondary learning. Knowing English is perceived to be the key to social mobility and meets the demands of postmodern globalization. Still, the success of international school students is contingent upon their “ability to assimilate in Western countries” and universities (Engel). These values are internalized by international school students and their families, furthering ideologies and industries, such as international education, that profoundly impact the world’s rising global citizens.

Even though multilingualism is generally considered an asset, English at international schools is emphasized to the point where students feel disadvantaged by their multilingualism. Interviews with grade 12 students highlight the insecurities and struggles in managing multiple languages, saying, “you’re mixing your languages in your head… like, it’s cool and all, but sometimes I think it might be easier not to speak the language.”
Another student said, “there are times when I get stressed because I feel like I don’t even know one of the languages properly… so sometimes I just wish I didn’t know it at all.” These interviews illustrate the frustrations multilingual students experience, wishing their minds were not “fogged” with other languages. One student shared that while attending middle school in the United States, people would ask to hear him speak Korean, and when he returned to Korea, his peers and teachers wanted to hear him speak English. The student reported feeling like “an animal in the zoo” in both situations. Another student reported that learning English made her “hyperaware” of the nuances of the language but that this hyperawareness was accompanied by performance anxiety, prompting self-criticism and lowering her confidence. The interviews reveal how multilingual students keep their languages private to preserve personal dignity, only sharing insight if given a reason or by unconscious slip. In a public setting, this exhibits humility and awareness of relevance, but in some instances, keeping one’s multilingual identities private can be an act of suppressing one’s home language, and therefore, a suppression of identity. Students might speak their home languages or a mix between their home languages and English with friends outside of class, but they are limited to the standard varieties of English in the classroom. Even though students report “mixing” their languages, they also strive to keep their languages separate. Unaware of the theory or term, they see translanguaging as something to avoid, preferring to switch off one language before turning on another, a parallel monolingual or a code-switch mindset if you will (see Grosjean or Heller).

From an English Language Teaching (ELT) perspective, translanguaging is a practical theory that assumes language is not compartmentalized but rather a single idiolect that contains all the linguistic features of multiple named languages. Translanguaging, as a right, can be enacted to develop learning in both languages simultaneously, enhancing content knowledge in English and home languages. However, in a school setting, translanguaging can be seen merely as an accommodation, even a stigmatized one, utilized to support English language learning and not home language learning. Not only does engaging in learning that is solely in English cause a disconnect or regression with students’ home languages, known as the “unsafe” stage of “language death” according to UNESCO, but the internalized hierarchies and perceptions that English is more important than a student’s home language “may later require a lot of undoing” as mentioned in the anthropologic critique Growing up in Transit: The Politics of Belonging at an International School (Tanu 78). So what are the ways educators and institutions can resist the standard language ideologies and practices at international schools? In the article The Place of World Englishes in Composition, Suresh Canagarajah says that “classes based on monolingual pedagogies disable students in contexts of linguistic pluralism” and considers the challenges and opportunities for students to engage with a broader range of their linguistic repertoires while learning academic writing skills (592). Attempting to pluralize composition while keeping in mind translangaging theories and the entangled complexities of English in international education, students in a grade 12 English class at an international school in Indonesia, were asked to engage with inquiries on language development and their experiences learning language.

Writing linguistic autobiographies began with exploring five texts: two novel excerpts, two essays, and a poem. Students were guided through analyzing the connections among the texts and drawing conclusions about language development, belletristic prose, and personal experience. In a class discussion on an excerpt from Kundera’s Unbearable Lightness of Being, students analyzed how the author complicates the word “compassion” when explaining the differences in translations from Latin-derived languages compared to Slavic and Scandinavian languages. When asked how the word “compassion” translates into Indonesian, the class paused until students realized no one had a definitive answer. At that moment, the class energy elevated as some students leaned over to a neighbor to discuss how they would use the word in Indonesian while others reached for their devices to look up the translation. After proposing words from the dictionary and introducing “slang” terms into the conversation, students concluded that the phrases, uses, and contexts for “compassion” in Indonesian were more related to caring, affection, and pity rather than feeling compelled to alleviate another’s suffering. This was affirmed by the Indonesian speakers and illustrated an invitation to bring their knowledge of the language into the English-medium public sphere, highlighting a shift in the linguistic hierarchies of the multilingual classroom. Even though monolingual Anglophones were limited in their contributions to the conversation, they respected the authority of the Indonesian speakers and seemed invested in learning how to use the word “compassion” in Indonesian because they live among the language.
This moment emerged from a low-stakes personal freewriting activity. Although most chose English, students could write in any language and were encouraged to generate ideas about the rhetorical effects of building an argument from the unsteady meanings of words in translation. As an extension task, students were asked to write about an untranslatable word or phrase. In a short, half-page piece, students could explore a word of their home language, a word they knew but found difficult to explain, or a word that loses its meaning when translated. The writing assignment made space for analyzing language varieties, providing an opportunity for students “to shuttle between [speech] communities in contextually relevant ways” (Canagarajah 593). A follow-up class workshop on the pieces could have aided in further exploration of translation and linguistic awareness. Students could ideate ways to use words, phrases, or linguistic features within a longer piece of writing, such as the opening lines of an essay, a counterclaim to an argument, or in commentary on the diction of a poem. Through various activities and discussions, students can engage with a broader range of their linguistic repertoires, bringing their private multilingual identities into the public space while developing the awareness that academic writing can also be creative.

Writing linguistic autobiographies in the high school English classroom allowed students to consider personal experiences as academic inquiry. In synthesizing ideas from essays by Ocean Vuong and bell hooks, students reflected on their language development, expressing new insights, and even validating obstacles as moments of growth. One student, who speaks three languages and had a late diagnosis of dyslexia, connected to bell hooks’ difficulties that when writing autobiographical accounts, “one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release” (84). The student explained that thinking back on the memories, such as the fear of reading aloud or “bombing” a spelling bee, was painful, but writing about them provided the chance to look at them in a new way, delineating traumatic experiences as the root of personal ethics. Another student described learning English as her language “development and decay.” She lost much of her home language by concentrating on English language to succeed in school. In retelling her childhood memories, she illustrates an awareness of the influences, such as cartoons only being available in English, that contributed to her language “decay.” Another student adapted the term campur aduk, an Indonesian phrase meaning “messy mix,” to describe his language development. The student reclaimed the negative connotation, appropriating it into a label he took pride in owning. These examples demonstrate how the personal connection to the texts students read in class can evolve into the foundation for the texts they produce. In writing linguistic autobiographies, students had multiple entry points to engage with their multilingual identities while developing metalinguistic and sociolinguistic awareness. Even though the unit and assessment task attempted to pluralize academic writing in the high school classroom, it is a feeble endeavor to resist and reconcile standard language ideologies in international schools, particularly when compared to the forces of curricular programs that dictate secondary education.

Academic writing in secondary learning environments often rests on the formulaic five-paragraph essay and various acronyms for paragraph organization. While Canagarajah discusses the academic writing of scholars and the academy, high school teachers are concerned with the timed essays of Advance Placement and International Bachelorette exams. As stable bridges between secondary and post-secondary education, the IB and AP programs perpetuate a construct of academic writing that has endured as the pinnacle of writing skills for high school students. Even though these programs provide a standard and ensure students are not “excluded from attaining proficiency in established traditional varieties of English,” this destination may not equip students with the skills and strategies that would instill a sense of agency necessary to pluralize academic writing as Canagarajah calls for in his article (597). While external examiners offer an informed, comparative view of student work based on program guidelines, teachers, obliged to help students pass, trust that standard written English will yield the highest test scores, further perpetuating standard language ideologies. With these programs driving the teaching and learning throughout secondary education, including international schools, finding the space for curriculum and pedagogies that attend to students’ multilingual realities can be a challenge. When possible, educators should be given opportunities to develop curricula for and with the students they teach. Having the freedom to explore the essay as a literary genre and a writing project, instructors can discover ways to encourage, challenge, and support students to use “their own varieties of English in formal texts” (599). The linguistic autobiography invited students to interrogate obstacles and gaps in their language development.
while embracing, even validating, their experiences. Students cultivated their linguistic awareness and style while crafting formal and creative texts.

The excerpt from *True Biz*, a 2022 young adult novel by Sara Nović, yielded an unexpected outcome in the linguistic autobiographies of transnational monolingual English speakers. Students connected to one of the characters hindered by a cochlear implant and unable to communicate through spoken and signed language. They reflected on their inabilities to communicate while living in different countries around the world. They described strategies that helped them find belonging and brought attention to the development of body language, overt but clear facial expressions, and visuals such as pictures or signs to communicate across cultures and languages. One student wrote about how referee motions in rugby can unite people who do not speak the same language. Another student explained how “a basketball dribble has a personality” and can communicate confidence, an invitation, and even a challenge, bringing attention to the metalanguage of sport and how it might serve as a doorway for developing sociolinguistic awareness. These linguistic autobiographies show that “speakers don’t have to be experts in another variety of English in order to speak to other communities. They simply need the metalinguistic, sociolinguistic, and attitudinal preparedness to negotiate differences even as they use their own dialects” (593). This points to the examples in which monolingual students describe sentiments of otherness, feeling outside their own language community even when at home in the United States. One student explained how difficult it was to keep up with conversations among his peers, while another told a story of a summer job at a local YMCA in his Midwest hometown. When a co-worker shared that “deer in his garden were eating his cabbages,” the student analyzed the moment, saying, “I knew all the words spoken but not a clue of what any of the words meant together.” Growing up in Jakarta, the student did not have a home garden, had probably never seen a deer, and had no idea they like to eat cabbage. Contrasting the assumptions of monolingual speakers lacking negotiation and accommodation skills, the linguistic autobiographies point to how monolingual transnational youth acquire the sociolinguistic awareness to traverse multiple speech communities even when they do not speak the language.

It is easy to criticize international education for thriving in the remnants of colonization and for perpetuating standard language ideologies that are shielded by the demands of postmodern globalization. As Canagarajah suggests, classrooms are sites that can subvert language policies and ideologies that accompany the multifaceted realities of English as a multinational language. I have discussed how monolingual anglophone educators can facilitate the development of metalinguistic and sociolinguistic awareness of all students—monolingual, bilingual, multilingual—and to engage with the complexities and tensions of English at international schools. It is possible to close the gaps between the aims and outcomes of international education, bringing multilingual identities to public spheres and dismantling the hierarchies of World Englishes that have primarily remained unchecked for decades. Though a subtle resistance to the conglomerate testing agencies and institutionalized curricular programs, pluralizing academic writing can change the way educators approach writing instruction and, as a result, the mindsets and habits that high school writers adopt. The texts students read and produce provide opportunities for transnational youth to navigate the private and unique struggles of learning academic writing skills in ways that are authentic to them. They can appropriate language and reconcile their experiences while learning to write in rhetorically effective ways. The international education community has an obligation to prepare generations of transnational youth for the realities of our globalized world while equipping them with the awareness, skills, and fortitude to upend the internalized perceptions of English and redefine what it means to obtain global cultural capital.

References


Linguistic Autobiography Class Resources


